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**How Do Schools Affect Inequalities in Political Participation: Compensation of Social Disadvantage or Provision of Differential Access?**

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Abstract

Both direct and indirect influences have been assumed to impact the transmission of political orientations within families. A lower socioeconomic status is related to lower intended political participation of adolescents. Within this context, schools play a crucial role in political socialisation, as citizenship education is assumed to either equalise or maintain these social disparities. We analyse a sub-dataset of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016 which includes 14-year-old students in four European countries: Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia) and the Netherlands. Multi-level regression analyses reveal that formal citizenship education compensates the relationship between students' socioeconomic status and intended electoral participation in Denmark, Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands, but not in Belgium (FL). Further, the composition of school classes is related to the perception of an open classroom climate in each of the four countries and to participation in civic activities at school in three countries.

*Keywords:* Citizenship education, formal learning opportunities, open classroom climate, student participation, social inequality

## Introduction

Political participation is said to give legitimacy to a democratic state (Dahl, 1989, p. 95; p. 222). It is described as a continuously expanding repertoire of activities aiming to defend interests, express opinions in public and influence decisions of authorities (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). The act of voting is the most basic form of political participation within this continuum and a central characteristic of representative democracies. Results of studies indicate that citizens with less formal education and lower income are less likely to vote in national elections (OECD, 2017, p. 166). This is a problematic result, given that a poor voter turnout of underprivileged groups will lead to their greater underrepresentation in their respective democracies (Peters & Ensink, 2015). Furthermore, the unequal opportunities of one generation also are manifested as unequal opportunities of their children (Corak, 2013). This extends to the transmission of political orientations (Glass, Bengston & Dunham, 1986; Jennings, Stoker & Bowers 2009).

Actual voting behaviour cannot be assessed among adolescents, as they usually are not legally entitled to vote in most elections; instead, studies related to political socialisation often observe behavioural intentions. Voting intentions are an antecedent of voting behaviour (Glasford, 2008). A recurring result of the IEA comparative civic education studies (Civic Education Study [CivEd] 1999, International Civic and Citizenship Education Study [ICCS] 2009 & 2016) is that in most countries in Europe the lower the students' socioeconomic status (SES), the less likely that they intend to vote as adults (Schulz et al., 2017; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr & Losito, 2010; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz, 2001). If the usually lower participation in politics of people with less favourable socioeconomic backgrounds manifests as less potential engagement of their children, schools have to play a crucial role in the process of political socialisation. At the same time, the role of schools in

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democratic societies is paradoxical: while pursuing the aim of creating equal opportunities, they may exacerbate social inequalities (Heid, 1988).

There is a growing body of research about differential effects of citizenship education related to students' possible future political participation (Campbell, 2008; Eckstein & Noack, 2016; Gainous & Martens, 2012; Hoskins, Janmaat, & Melis, 2017; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Neundorf, Niemi, & Smets, 2016). However, the methodical approaches strongly vary, while the results are inconclusive and therefore hardly can be generalised. The aims of this study are to address these shortcomings by integrating different methodical approaches and applying this approach to a sub-sample of the ICCS 2016 comprising four neighbouring countries in Western Europe (i.e. Belgium (Flanders) [FL], Denmark, Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia [NRW]) and the Netherlands). Our research questions are as follows: How does citizenship education at school affect possible future inequalities in political participation? Is it suitable to compensate for social disadvantage? Alternatively, do schools maintain these inequalities by providing differential access to citizenship education?

### **Background**

#### **Political Socialisation and Social Disadvantage**

Political socialisation during adolescence 'describes the process by which citizens crystalize political identities, values and behavior that remain relatively persistent throughout later life' (Neundorf & Smets, 2017, p. 1). Among others, families and schools are focal agents especially of early political socialisation. 'Socializing agents either directly or indirectly teach children about politics but also have a mobilizing function as they influence, encourage, or discourage young people's political preferences and political action' (p. 6).

Direct and indirect influences have been assumed to impact the transmission of political orientations within families. In reference to the social learning theory (e.g. Bandura, 1971), Jennings et al. (2009) state a direct parental influence on political orientations. The

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transmission of political orientations from parents to their children is said to be conditioned on the observation of political behaviours, discussions about political issues and the exchange of political information. If families are highly politicised and provide consistent opportunities over time to shape political orientations, children are more likely to adapt their parents' views. A family's SES may well be directly related to this (Hoskins & Janmaat, in press). The SES denotes the relative position of an individual within a society's social structure. A child's SES is related to parental occupational status, educational attainment and therefore income, as well as home literacy resources (Sirin, 2005). The political knowledge and civic engagement of individuals substantially vary based on their SES (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996), so it is assumed that social learning opportunities within a family's context may also vary according to their social background. An open family environment for discussion in which young people are encouraged to make up their own mind and put forward their own perspective has been found to be associated with a higher social economic background (Hoskins & Janmaat, in press). Thus, the higher a family's SES, the more frequent and richer the possible opportunities related to political learning. By contrast, low levels of parental politicisation might leave children open to the influence of other agents of political socialisation (Jennings et al., 2009). In this case, civic education at school might be relatively more important in terms of shaping political orientations.

However, SES is a complex matter, given that intergenerational transmission extends to structural factors such as social class, race or religion. Families tend to determine their children's location within the social structure. This indirectly influences political orientations, as children may face similar attitude-shaping experiences (Glass et al., 1986). In formally stratified education systems, students' SES affects their allocation to academic or vocational tracks (Chmielewski, 2014). The segregation of students is further caused by implicit tracking (Salchegger, 2016), such as the geographical location in connection with the catchment areas

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of schools. The social composition is therefore assumed to be more homogenous within a specific school than between different schools. Students will mostly have peers with a similar social background. Janmaat, Mostafa and Hoskins (2014) claim that the social and ethnic segregation of students in different school tracks may affect future voting behaviour. Some modes of civic education strongly rely on peer interaction (Scheerens, 2011). In a tracked education system, direct and indirect influences of political socialisation in the families interact, whereby students will most likely partake in these social learning occasions with peers who have faced similar political socialisation at home. The efficiency of civic education at school should therefore be dependent not only on the individual background but also the classroom composition to some degree. In the next section, we will investigate specific dimensions of civic education at school and their contribution towards compensating for or maintaining social disadvantage related to political participation.

### **Variation in Contexts of Political Socialisation at School**

We assume that citizenship education principally will either equalise or maintain social disparities. Essentially, three conditions of citizenship education related to inequality in intended political participation have been described (Hoskins et al., 2017): unequal access to citizenship education, compensatory effects of citizenship education and the accelerating effects of citizenship education. Unequal access refers to barriers hindering a group of students from utilising citizenship education at school: ‘Schools, rather than helping to equalize the capacity and commitments needed for democratic participation, appear to be exacerbating this inequality by providing more preparation for those who are already likely to attain a disproportionate amount of civic and political voice’ (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008, p. 18). Compensatory effects occur when disadvantaged students benefit more from citizenship education compared with their more privileged peers. By contrast, acceleration effects occur when privileged students benefit more from citizenship education compared

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with disadvantaged students (Campbell, 2008). In this study, we decided to adapt Campbell's (2008; see also Eckstein & Noack, 2016; Neundorff, Niemi & Smets, 2016) terminology of 'compensation' and 'acceleration' to contrast these possible facets of moderating effects, which is synonymous with the terminology of 'mitigation' and 'acceleration' as introduced by Hoskins et al. (2017). These conditions can be related to various dimensions of citizenship education at school.

Scheerens (2011) distinguishes between formal and informal citizenship learning experiences. Formal learning experiences in lessons of citizenship education are related to explicit teaching. They are usually goal directed and hierarchically structured. Informal citizenship learning experiences occur when students deal with conflicts and differences and/or collaborate with their peers, e.g. in an open classroom climate or in civic participation activities at school. These follow the premise that learning is not simply the transmission of knowledge. Learning can be described as an 'integral part' of social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35). Situated learning shifts the focus from intentional instruction to collaboration and mutual exchange with peers as focal drivers of learning. Learners become more knowledgeable over time by participating in a 'community of practice' (p. 42).

Dassonneville, Quintelier, Hooghe and Claes (2012) distinguish three different dimensions of citizenship education: open classroom climate, active participation in civic activities at school and formal citizenship education. Each of these three dimensions may be related to (inequalities in) intended political participation.

**Open classroom climate.** '[C]ontroversy is not an unfortunate byproduct of democracy, but one of its core and vital elements' (Hess, 2004, p. 257). In an open classroom climate, controversial political issues are discussed in a balanced way. Students are encouraged to express their opinions freely. An open classroom climate in civic education is characterised by dealing with conflict (Scheerens, 2011). The discussion of controversial

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issues in a classroom does not necessarily lead to a decision or solution to a certain problem, although in an ideal case it closely resembles the process of decision-making in representative democracies. While it does not include the act of casting a vote, voting is also an act of participation in a controversial debate.

Students exchange their viewpoints, enter in contact with differing opinions and practice conversational skills. This may provide learning opportunities for students who do not experience a balanced approach to controversial issues at home and therefore compensate for the effect of a disadvantaged home background on intended political participation. On the other hand, the potential learning experiences might be strongly dependent on the available interlocutors. In the context of a tracked education system, the access to potentially deeper/richer opportunities to experience controversy is assumed to be limited. This unequal access might even accelerate the difference between students with disadvantaged and more favourable home backgrounds.

Knowles, Torney-Purta and Barber (2018) emphasise the positive relationship between an open classroom climate and learning outcomes of civic education, such as intended political participation. Results of research regarding the relation between SES, an open classroom climate and intended political engagement are inconclusive. Compensating (Campbell, 2008; Eckstein & Noack, 2016) as well as accelerating effects (Gainous & Martens, 2012) of an open classroom climate have been described. Hoskins et al. (2017) suggest that the positive effect of an open classroom climate on intentions to vote is primarily a matter of access, as students with a more favourable home background also describe their classroom climate as being more open for discussions. This corresponds with the findings of Kahne and Middaugh (2008).

**Participation in civic activities at school.** Active participation in extracurricular civic activities at school such as involvement in collaborative projects or student councils

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gives students the opportunity to acquire ‘political skills, attitudes, and realistic expectations about the political process’ (Dassonneville et al., 2012, p. 141). While especially student council activities resemble processes in representative democracies, students also work together towards a common goal in other extracurricular activities. Learning experiences that occur through participation in the immediate context of the school may be transferred to more complex and distal societal contexts. Keating and Janmaat (2016) show positive relations between participation in school-based civic activities, voting intentions and actual electoral participation.

Experiences with participation at school might prove an alternative and effective approach to exemplify political processes. This potentially encourages students to participate politically in the future, which otherwise would not be the case. However, extracurricular activities are usually non-mandatory and students’ choice to participate in them might ‘equally be influenced by the interest in politics of the school that they attend, their peers and their teachers, which can all be influenced by social background’ (Hoskins et al., 2017, p. 98). As the cooperation with peers is a central characteristic of these activities, their possible quality and potential for learning may also be affected by tracking.

Gainous and Martens (2012) observe that students with a less advantaged home background are more likely to state voting intentions if they took opportunities to actively participate at school and in out-of-school contexts. Eckstein and Noack (2016) show positive relations between participation in school decisions and intended political behaviours in low-track contexts. Hoskins et al. (2017) as well as Kahne and Middaugh (2008) stress unequal access to civic activities at school. Less advantaged students are also those who are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities.

**Formal citizenship education.** Formal citizenship education allows students to gain political knowledge through a highly structured curriculum with clearly-outlined learning



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objectives, which is considered key to developing political competence (Detjen, Massing, Richter & Weißen, 2012). Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) emphasise that in order to make political choices, citizens need knowledge about the structure and decision processes in a representative democracy, information about current political issues to follow political debates and relevant politicians as well as political parties. The broader and deeper that factual knowledge of citizens is, 'the better able they are to engage in politics' (p. 65). It is unknown how much knowledge is necessary to become engaged. Dudley and Gitelson (2002) suggest that in order to engage in basic acts of political participation like voting in elections, a more basic knowledge base might be sufficient compared with more active modes of political participation. If students have fewer opportunities to learn at least basic factual political knowledge within a disadvantaged home context, the implementation of a formal curriculum in citizenship education should be an effective way to compensate for this disadvantage. On the other hand, schools with a higher number of students with more favourable home backgrounds might adapt explicit teaching about political processes to the potentially higher levels of initial factual knowledge. Therefore, a student's SES might influence her/his access to citizenship education that is broader and/or deeper.

Citizens with higher political knowledge are also more likely to participate by voting (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996, pp. 226–227). This finding extends to the voting intentions of students (Schulz et al., 2017, p. 193). However, Torney-Purta et al. (2001) describe the effect of civic education on learning outcomes like civic knowledge as a 'product of cumulative learning' (p. 135), facilitated at school across various school years and subjects, as well as outside of the school context. Therefore, civic knowledge may not be a reliable indicator of civic learning that occurs *exclusively* at school. Moreover, the approaches to citizenship education vary between countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017) and the curriculum varies across education systems. Torney-Purta et al. (2001) claim that self-reports

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about curricular learning at school could be used to identify schools' impact on civic learning.

Compensating effects of and differential access to formal citizenship education at school have been described. Students with a lower SES who experience more formal citizenship education state that they are more likely to participate politically (Gainous & Martens 2012; Hoskins et al., 2017; Neundorf et al., 2016). Kahne and Middaugh (2008) describe that students with a higher SES are more likely to have access to formal learning opportunities.

Overall, in previous studies, compensating effects of various dimensions of citizenship education on the relationship between an individual's SES and his/her intention to vote are described (see above: Campbell, 2008; Eckstein & Noack, 2016; Gainous & Martens, 2012; Hoskins et al., 2017; Neundorf et al., 2016), and the prevalence of effects of unequal access is found (also Hoskins et al., 2017; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Furthermore, in one study an accelerating effect is described (Gainous & Martens, 2012). However, given that these results are inconsistent, they hardly can be generalised. Moreover, the results are inconclusive for several reasons. First, the analytical approaches adopted in the studies have differed. In some studies, contextual effects are examined (Campbell, 2008; Eckstein & Noack, 2016; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008) while in others effects are only described at the individual level (Gainous & Martens, 2012; Hoskins et al., 2017; Neundorf et al., 2016). The operationalisation of dependent and independent variables strongly differs among the studies. In addition, in none of the studies reviewed is a measure of civic knowledge used as a control variable. As previously stated, civic knowledge is confounded with (intended) political participation. Moreover, due to contextual differences the results of the studies are inconclusive and only one study (Neundorf et al., 2016) compares different education

systems. In the next section, a description of the education systems of four neighbouring countries in Western Europe and their approaches to citizenship education is provided.

### **Context of Citizenship Education in Education Systems**

International large-scale assessment studies provide comparative insights into the cognitive and behavioural effects of school systems (Kyriakides & Creemers, 2016). Kankaraš and Moors (2014, p. 396) argue that the interpretation of results of such studies should take into account differences in regional characteristics such as language and culture. Results in neighbouring countries seem to be less affected by cultural inequivalence of measurement. In order to limit the effect of regional characteristics on the results of this study, a sub-sample of the ICCS 2016 dataset comprising students in four neighbouring countries in Western Europe (Belgium (FL), Denmark, Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands) is analysed.

The four countries under investigation in this study significantly differ in terms of tracking. Germany (NRW) has a highly stratified school system, in which tracking students begins after four years of primary education. Belgium (FL) as well as the Netherlands track students after six years. In Denmark, no tracking or segregation takes place until completion of Grade 9 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018).

Another difference between these education systems is when and how citizenship education is integrated at the primary and lower secondary school levels (ISCED levels 1 and 2). In Germany and the Netherlands, citizenship education is mostly integrated into social sciences, whereas in Denmark it is integrated into most subjects (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017, p. 36). In Belgium (FL), social sciences are compulsory at ISCED level 1 only. Later, cross-curricular objectives of citizenship education are pre-defined, although their practical implementation is left to the individual schools (p. 43). National recommendations regarding extracurricular activities are provided in Germany

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and the Netherlands. In Belgium (FL), school autonomy is stated as the reason why no such recommendation is made in this regard, while the Danish government ‘does not see the need to provide regulations or guidance in this area’, because ‘engagement with the community and extra-curricular activity is part of the daily lives of young people’ (p. 90). Regarding the outcomes of citizenship education, the education systems do not perform equally (Schulz et al., 2017). Differences in the formation of an intention to participate in elections may therefore correlate with differences at the education system level. All interpretations of the results should take this into account accordingly.

### Hypotheses

We propose two sets of hypotheses. First, in line with previous research, we expect to observe *compensating* effects of all three dimensions of citizenship education under investigation (Hypothesis 1): the lower the students’ SES, the higher the effect of 1a) an open classroom climate, 1b) participation in civic activities at school, and/or 1c) formal citizenship education on their intended electoral participation. By contrast *accelerating* effects (Hypothesis 2) would be indicated, if students from more advantaged backgrounds gain more from 2a) an open classroom climate, 2b) participation in civic activities at school, and/or 2c) formal citizenship education. The alternative hypothesis (Hypothesis 3) is that 3a) an open classroom climate, 3b) participation in civic activities at school, and/or 3c) formal citizenship education do neither compensate nor accelerate the relation between students’ SES and intended electoral participation.

Second, we expect *unequal access* (Hypothesis 4) to citizenship education at school: the higher the students’ SES, 4a) the higher their perception of an open classroom climate, 4b) the more that they participate in civic activities at school, and/or 4c) the more formal citizenship education that they receive. Alternatively, non-significant relations between

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students' SES and an open classroom climate, participation in civic activities at school, and/or formal citizenship education would indicate an equal access to these.

In order to address the school's role in compensating for or maintaining inequalities in political participation, these hypotheses are tested based on ICCS 2016 data.

### **Method**

#### **Sample**

The ICCS 2016 investigates how well 14-year-old students in 24 countries are prepared to take on their roles as active citizens. The data were collected between February and June 2016. A stratified two-step approach was used in the sampling, which ensured that the results can be generalised to all students in the target grade in the respective educational system. A sub-sample of the ICCS 2016 sample comprising students in Belgium (FL), Denmark, Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands was selected for analysis and comparison. Education systems in other regions of Belgium and other federal states of Germany were not included in ICCS 2016. Therefore, the results cannot also be generalised to the other parts of the respective countries. Descriptive statistics of each measure are shown in Table 1. The dataset is available at the IEA Data Repository.

#### **Analytical Procedure**

The characteristics of the clustered sample design of ICCS 2016 required attention in all analyses conducted to prevent biased estimates and biased standard errors. Survey weights were applied to correct estimates for unequal selection probability in each analysis (Hahs-Vaughn, McWayne, Bulotsky-Shearer, Wen & Faria, 2011). We further applied multi-level modelling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) to address the non-independence of sample units. All analyses were conducted in Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017).

In order to determine compensating effects of citizenship education at school on the relationship between students' SES and their intention to participate in elections (Hypotheses

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1-3), we adapted the approaches of Campbell (2008) and Hoskins et al. (2017) and included interaction terms (Aiken & West, 1991). One multi-level regression model with interaction effects was estimated per country. Students' SES, perception of openness during classroom discussion, participation in civic activities at school and self-reports on formal citizenship education at school as well as interactions between the three measures of citizenship education at school and the students' SES were introduced as independent variables. Negative regression coefficients of these interaction terms would indicate a compensating effect. Civic knowledge has been confounded with intended electoral participation (see above). In order to determine the contribution of citizenship education at school to the dependent variable, the analyses needed to control for this effect. These analyses further included the class mean of students' SES, perception of openness during classroom discussion, participation in civic activities at school and self-reports on formal citizenship education at school as well as civic knowledge.

In order to examine the access to citizenship education at school (Hypothesis 4), we tried to explain the perception of open classroom discussions, participation in civic activities at school, and self-reports on formal citizenship education by students' socioeconomic background (see also Hoskins et al., 2017). We utilised a multi-level approach (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008) and estimated one model per country.

### **Dependent Variable: Intended Electoral Participation**

In ICCS 2016, intended electoral participation was measured using three items related to voting in national and local elections and informing about candidates in advance. The students were asked to indicate on a four-point Likert scale (ranging from 'I would certainly do this' to 'I would certainly not do this') how likely they were to engage in these activities as adults. Following item response theory, a scaled score was derived from these items in relation to the ICCS 2009 dataset. As the scale was equated to the same scale in ICCS 2009

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to ensure comparability over time, this results in a mean of 51 scale points and a standard deviation of 10 scale points in the international dataset of ICCS 2016 (Compared to 50 scale points in ICCS 2009, see Schulz et al., 2017, p. 98). Higher scale values indicated a stronger probability of answering the items in a positive way. Full documentation of all scales and indices used in this study is provided in the ICCS 2016 technical report (Schulz, Carstens, Losito & Fraillon, 2018).

### **Independent Variables**

**SES.** In ICCS 2016, three indices were used to operationalise the students' socioeconomic background (Schulz et al., 2017, p. 65): the highest-ranking occupation of parents, the highest level of education attained by parents and self-reported number of books at home. Using principal component analysis, one factor was extracted. This national index of socioeconomic background was standardised within each country to a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

**Open classroom climate.** In ICCS 2016, participants rated six items related to their perception of the atmosphere in class while discussing political or social issues (e.g. 'Students express opinions in class even when their opinions are different from most of the other students') on a four-point Likert scale (ranging from 'never' to 'often'). A scaled score with a mean of 50 scale points and a standard deviation of 10 scale points was derived from the responses.

**Participation in civic activities at school.** The scale covered six school-based civic activities involving representative or active extracurricular participation (e.g. 'voting for a class representative or school parliament'). Students stated how recently they were involved in each of these activities ('within the past 12 months', 'more than a year ago', 'never'). The scaled score was standardised to a mean of 50 scale points and a standard deviation of 10 scale points.

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**Formal citizenship education.** Students rated on a four-point Likert scale (ranging from ‘to a large extent’ to ‘not at all’) how much they had learned about seven topics related to civic education that mainly focused on processes of parliamentary democracies at the state level (e.g. ‘How citizens can vote in local and national elections’). The scaled score was standardised to a mean of 50 scale points and a standard deviation of 10 scale points.

**Civic knowledge.** In ICCS 2016, a cognitive test was administered to assess participants’ civic knowledge, containing 87 items. A rotated booklet design was used and students responded to 32-33 items each. A one-dimensional scale was constructed and internationally scaled to a mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 100. Higher scores indicated a stronger probability of responding correctly to more difficult items. Easier items were related to more basic principles and concepts of civics and citizenship, while more difficult items required abstract knowledge of citizenship concepts, evaluation of complex relationships between civic institutions and – to some degree – critical thinking. Full documentation of the knowledge test is provided by Schulz et al. (2017) and Schulz et al. (2018). Civic knowledge was used as control variable in this study.

In Table 1, descriptive statistics for each variable in each country are shown. Because the national index of socioeconomic background was standardised to a mean of 0 in each country, it was not reported in this table.

---Table 1 here---

The average rating for perception of classroom climate of students in Belgium (FL) corresponds with the international mean in ICCS 2016. They show below average means on the self-reported learning scale and the scale for participation in civic activities at school. Students in Denmark generally exceed the international mean of perception of classroom climate. The other two measures of dimensions of citizenship education at school correspond with the international means of ICCS 2016. Students in Germany (NRW) show average



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means on the three scales related to dimensions of citizenship education at school. Compared with students in the other countries, those in the Netherlands have the lowest means on these scales. A correlation table including each measure is provided in appendix A.

### Results

#### Compensation

Table 2 shows the results of the multi-level regression analyses per country as described above. In order to determine whether citizenship education at school is able to reduce the future gap in political participation between disadvantaged students and more privileged students, interaction effects are evaluated. A negative interaction effect indicates a compensating effect, whereby the lower the SES, the stronger the effect of the respective measure of citizenship education on students' intended electoral participation.

---Table 2 here---

In every model, one interaction effect is significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). The lower the students' SES in Denmark, Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands, the stronger the impact of formal citizenship education on their intended electoral participation. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the interactions between formal citizenship education and students' SES, based on the unstandardised model results with mean-centred covariates. It shows how low and high formal citizenship education affects the intended electoral participation of students one standard deviation below and above the average SES. In the case of Denmark, Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands, the plot indicates a crossover interaction. While this finding strongly supports the compensation hypothesis in case of formal citizenship education in these three countries, it also reveals a counterintuitive effect, whereby high formal citizenship education may be related to lower levels of intended electoral participation among students with a high SES, especially in Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands. In Belgium (FL), neither a compensating nor accelerating effect of formal citizenship education is observed,

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although the lower the students' SES is in Belgium (FL), the higher the effect of participation in civic activities at school on their intended electoral participation. The non-significance of the other interaction effects indicates an independence of school effects from the students' SES. Citizenship education in general positively correlates with intended electoral participation but does not seem to substantially reduce the gap in the intention to participate in politics between disadvantaged students and more privileged students in the four analysed countries.

---Figure 1 here---

The strong positive effect of civic knowledge in all four models – compared with the rather moderate effects of the other predictors – further indicates that other sources of civic learning outside of school might influence students' intention to participate in elections. In addition to this, while controlling for the other predictors, there is a residual effect of SES at the individual level in Denmark, Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands. Furthermore, the average SES on the classroom level and intended electoral participation correlates in the four observed countries, even if students shared the perception of an open classroom climate, shared the amount of experience with participation at school, reported the same amount of formal citizenship education and exhibited the same mean civic knowledge. Compared with this effect of classroom composition, the different dimensions of citizenship education at school are relatively less important in explaining intended political participation at the classroom level.

The multi-level models explain between 12% (Belgium [FL]) and 22% (Denmark and Germany [NRW]) of the variance in the dependent variable at the individual level. Most of its variance at the classroom level was explained by the models (between 90% in Denmark and 99% in Germany [NRW] and the Netherlands). Compared with Denmark and Belgium (FL), the classroom aggregates are stronger predictors of intended electoral participation in

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Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands. They account for 19% and 17% of the variance at the classroom level, respectively, as indicated by the intraclass correlation. However, the contributions of SES and civic knowledge to the  $R^2$  values have to be taken into account when interpreting these results.

### Access

The results of the multi-level regression models to determine access to citizenship education at school are reported per country in Table 3. Significant positive regression coefficients indicate unequal access of disadvantaged students to citizenship education, whereby students with higher SES and students in classes with a higher average SES perceive the classroom climate as being more open, report more experience with student participation and/or have received more formal citizenship education.

---Table 3 here---

With some exceptions, each measure of citizenship education at school is significantly predicted by students' SES at the individual and/or classroom level. Students in classrooms with a higher average SES especially perceive the classroom climate as being more open in each of the four education systems. Although some differences between the countries are observed. Participation in civic activities at school has lower variance at the classroom level in Germany (NRW) and higher variance on the classroom level in Belgium (FL) and the Netherlands, compared with an open classroom climate and formal citizenship education. The average SES of students in Denmark is not significantly related to participation in civic activities at school. Furthermore, the average SES is not significantly related to formal citizenship education in Belgium (FL), Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands. This indicates a more equal access to these dimensions of citizenship education at school.

### Discussion

In summary, the conducted analyses yielded remarkable results regarding citizenship education in each of the four education systems under investigation. Overall, the capabilities of the four education systems are limited to compensate for the lesser intended civic engagement related to a disadvantaged home background. Unequal access to citizenship education seems to be a predominant explanation for unequal intentions to participate in elections in each of the four countries.

Regarding *open classroom climate*, we accept neither the compensation nor the acceleration hypotheses in any of the four education systems (H1a and H2a). It does not compensate for the connectedness of disadvantaged home background and students' lower probability to state voting intentions. The effects described by Campbell (2008) are not replicated for the selected education systems. We assume that the positive relation between an open classroom climate and intended electoral participation is independent of students' SES (H3a). However, in each of the four education systems, students in classes with a lower average SES were less likely to perceive an open classroom climate. Its positive effect on voting intentions is therefore limited by an unequal access to it (H4a), as also reported by Hoskins et al. (2017).

Our results related to *participation in civic activities at school* vary between the countries. In one case, we accept the compensation hypothesis (H1b): the lower the students' SES in Belgium (FL), the more that they gained from participation in civic activities at school. There is no similar indication in the other three education systems. Furthermore, we do not observe accelerating effects in any country (H2b) and therefore again do not reject the alternative hypothesis (H3b) in Denmark, Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands: if students participate at school, they are also more likely to state voting intentions regardless of their home background. In three education systems, the classroom composition is related to

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unequal access to participation at school (H4b): the higher the average SES in a class, the more likely that students in Belgium (FL), Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands reported to have joined these activities in the past. Compared with Belgium (FL) and the Netherlands, this link is relatively weaker in Germany (NRW), while the class composition is not significantly related to participation at school in Denmark. These variations between the countries may be due to differences in the legal regulations for student participation at school; for instance, in Denmark and Germany (NRW), student participation is firmly established (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017).

*Formal citizenship education* compensates the relation between a disadvantaged home background and intended political participation in Denmark, Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands (H1c). This effect corresponds to the findings of Hoskins et al. (2017). This effect is only not observed in one country, namely Belgium (FL). In this case, we reject the compensation and acceleration hypotheses (H1c, H2c) and instead accept the alternative hypothesis (H3c). Furthermore, unequal access (H4c) to formal citizenship education is observed in Denmark. This is a problematic result, as it might limit the corresponding compensation effect. The more equal access to formal citizenship education in Belgium (FL) and the Netherlands is not necessarily a positive result either, as on average students in both countries claimed to have learned little about civic institutions in an international comparison (Schulz et al., 2017).

It seems plausible that especially formal citizenship education might compensate for a disadvantaged SES. Compared with their disadvantaged peers, students with more favourable home backgrounds may have already learned about basic democratic institutions and processes at home from their generally more politically-engaged parents. In this case, citizenship education classes would simply represent another source of basic knowledge about representative democracy, which should be easily accessible for students regardless of

their home background. However, the implementation of more formal citizenship education for disadvantaged students might not be sufficient to address possible future inequalities in voting behaviour. If citizenship education for disadvantaged students does not exceed the transmission of mere facts, it is questionable how effective their future political engagement will be and consequently the extent to which they will make their voices heard and see their needs addressed.

Outcomes of learning are not only dependent on the individual students and teachers, but also on the immediate social environment. In citizenship education, discussions in an open classroom environment and collaboration with peers in civic activities at school are valuable opportunities to explore identities, recognise one's own strengths, shape shared interests and experience participation as well as its limitations. This might ultimately engage students in society (Keating & Janmaat, 2016). The effectiveness of this socially-situated citizenship education might be challenged by classroom composition, which in turn is related to tracking. As previously described, tracking is not solely explicit. For example, implicit tracking (Salchegger, 2016) might explain why we also observe unequal access to citizenship education in Denmark, which is counterintuitive to the assumption that the participation gap might be narrower in more equitable education systems (Janmaat et al., 2014).

Tracking is related to attitudes towards school: 'Whereas high-track students tend to accept the school's demands as the normative definition of behavior, low-track students resist the school's rules and may even attempt to subvert them' (Gamoran & Berends, 1987, p. 426). Furthermore, in low-track classrooms, where students are more likely to have disadvantaged home backgrounds, students seem to behave less supportive towards their peers (Schwartz, 1981). The voluntary choice to join (extracurricular) student participation activities might therefore not only be influenced by personal dispositions, but also by the immediate social environment (Hoskins et al., 2017). Students might not become engaged

simply because they see that other students also do not engage. Students who want to engage within lower track contexts might face a higher cost of non-conforming in this way (see also Elster, 2015). ‘By downgrading others’ efforts and intelligence, one can set oneself apart from classmates and ensure that they do not succeed where one might fail’ (Schwartz, 1981, p. 117). Therefore, tracking might negatively affect opportunities for civic learning that are dependent on collaboration and interaction with the school context. Ultimately, if disadvantaged students are less likely to profit from social learning environments, individual teachers and teaching practices gain relatively more importance in processes of political socialisation at school.

The results reported in this study have some important limitations. From a conceptual perspective, it could be criticised that especially the intention to vote might not be an appropriate educational aim in the context of social disadvantages, given that voting might merely reproduce political structures that maintain inequalities. This might be true for some political systems, although the democratic systems in Western Europe under investigation are intact in terms of real alternatives that people can vote for, freedom to vote and freedom of association. The non-voting of disadvantaged citizens might harm these structures in the long term. Furthermore, active learning in social environments may also foster other citizenship competences that empower students to influence societal circumstances in their own favour by means other than voting. A multi-dimensional approach to examine the outcomes of citizenship education could be adopted in future studies.

From a methodological perspective, ICCS 2016 is of limited scope as a highly standardised study. The observed crossover interactions of formal citizenship education in Denmark, Germany (NRW) and the Netherlands would allow interpreting the results differently. We followed the premise that especially in formalised citizenship learning environments, students should face a similar curriculum that is roughly based on common

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content and objectives regardless of their background or school track. However, this would not explain why students with higher SES show lower levels of voting intentions when reporting that they received more formal citizenship education. It could be possible that objectives of citizenship education differ by track. While formal citizenship education in lower tracks might focus on facilitating basic support for the political system and motivation for political engagement, curricular learning in higher tracks might address democratic systems more critically (e.g. thematise the individual decision and right not to attend elections). However, we do not have further indication supporting this explanation (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017). Nonetheless, a more critical approach to formal citizenship education is not necessarily connected with a standardised curriculum. It may also be caused by higher initial levels of political knowledge of students in higher school tracks, which in turn influence how teachers approach the subject in these contexts. A deeper insight into specific interactions during lessons on citizenship education would be needed to support this explanation, whereby ICCS 2016 might not provide suitable data to systematically assess research questions related to this.

In conclusion, unequal intentions to participate in politics are predominantly connected with unequal access to citizenship education and the limited ability of the education systems to compensate for a disadvantaged home background. However, without equal access, political socialisation at school cannot adequately address future inequalities in political participation. These results set challenges for both citizenship education as well as future research. At a system level, education policies that lead to more balanced classroom compositions might support the development of political attitudes and behavioural intentions that enable students with a disadvantaged home background to engage in politics. At the school and classroom levels, a solution to overcome the mechanisms that cause inequalities in intended political participation would not be simply the provision of *more* opportunities to



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actively participate or debate; rather, teachers could encourage students in low-track contexts to become involved in student participation activities and support them to build supportive and beneficial structures within their classroom contexts. This should be accompanied by research that especially focuses on contextual effects in explaining unequal access to and unequal outcomes of citizenship education at school.

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